AUGUSTA MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 89,372 acres

The Augusta Mountain WSA (NV-030-108) is located in three Nevada counties: southeast Pershing, northeast Churchill and western Lander. The WSA is approximately 60 miles southeast of Winnemucca, Nevada and a 5-hour drive from Reno, Nevada. The WSA includes 89,372 acres of public lands and no private or state inholdings. The boundary follows the Home Station Ranch Roads on the north and west sides and utilizes two mine access roads on the south and east sides. At its maximum dimensions, the Augusta Mountain WSA ranges from 17 miles in a north-south direction to 13 miles in an east-west direction. The altitude ranges from 3,400 feet to 8,400 feet.

The WSA straddles a north-south ridge of the Augusta Mountain Range. The study area can be divided into three sections: northern, central and southern. The northern portion is a landscape of silicic ashflow tuff canyons and drainages. Isolated patches of pinyon-juniper are scattered through the area. The central section encompasses Cain Mountain, a limestone peak which is the highest point of the WSA. The mountain drains in all directions via rugged, deep drainages--Favret Canyon being the largest. The canyons have fossils and are blocked by intermittent waterfalls, with dense pinyon-juniper stands in the upper reaches.

The southern portion of the WSA is 6 to 7 miles long and 13 miles wide. It is uniformly hilly with shallow southwest draining washes and gullies and gently sloping foothills vegetated with low sagebrush and rabbitbrush. There are approximately 1,000 acres of pinyon-juniper woodland covering slopes above 6,600 feet.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE

The recommendation for this WSA is to release all 89,372 acres for uses other than wilderness.

The recommendation for the Augusta Mountains WSA emphasizes maintaining access to the entire WSA for mineral exploration and extraction. Large portions of the WSA have potential for the occurrence of a diverse group of mineral resources including geothermal, oil and gas, hardrock locatable minerals and saleable minerals. There is a high potential for geothermal resources. In addition, there is moderate potential for occurrence of cobalt, uranium, mercury, tungsten, nickel and zinc, all of which are listed as Strategic and Critical Materials. The recommendation would also make available potentially economic deposits of limestone, dolomite and zeolite which have moderate potential for occurrence in the WSA. Oil and gas resources have moderate potential for occurrence on parts of the WSA. The recommendation encourages exploration and development of these energy resources.

The high and moderate potential for occurrence of a diversity of mineral resources in the different parts of the WSA combined with the current interest in the area (2,000 acres of mining claims, 40,000 acres of oil and gas leases and 20,000 acres under lease for geothermal development) is sufficient evidence to conclude that in the future this area could produce significant quantities of important mineral resources.

The development and extraction of mineral resources in this WSA will cause the loss of wilderness values. Development of some or all of the 2,000 acres of mineral claims would occur with or without wilderness designation since these are all pre-FLPMA claims. Other mineral exploration and development would probably affect 2,000 acres of the WSA. Because the areas with mineral resource potential are so widely dispersed there was no reasonable alternative that would allow for wilderness designation, but it is projected that even after mineral exploration much of the area will retain wilderness characteristics.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The WSA is predominantly natural. The Augusta Mountain WSA straddles a north-south ridge of the Augusta Mountain Range. The study area can be divided into three sections: northern, central and southern. The northern portion is a landscape of silicic ashflow tuff canyons and drainages. The central section encompasses Cain Mountain, a limestone peak which is the highest point of the WSA. The mountain drains in all directions via rugged, deep drainages--Favret Canyon being the largest. Many of the canyons have fossils and are blocked by intermittent waterfalls. The southern portion of the WSA is six to seven miles long and 13 miles wide. It is uniformly hilly with shallow southwest draining washes and gullies and gently sloping foothills.

The three grazing allotments do have the following range improvements: three corrals, two developed springs, one well, two fences (5 miles) and a cabin and corral combination. Approximately half of these structures lie on the boundary of the WSA while the remainder lie within the WSA by several miles. There are six vehicle ways (4.4 miles). There has been some mining activity in the past at the end of two cherrystem roads along the eastern boundary. There is some surface disturbance from past exploratory mining activity along the northwest boundary. The WSA boundary runs along the edge of this disturbance and eliminates it from the study area. The presently active McCoy Mine is 1/2-mile from the southern tip.

B. Solitude: The Augusta Mountain WSA offers outstanding opportunities for solitude. In the northern section of the WSA, the topographic and vegetative screening is excellent. The edges of the boundary are dissected alluvial fans with relatively poor screening for visitors. Vegetation is mainly a low shrub type with occasional clumps of willow in the drainage bottoms which offer fair to good vegetative screening. Excellent topographic and vegetative screening may be found in the middle section. The deep, rugged drainages are lined with willow and cottonwood, with dense populations of pinyon-juniper on the northern slopes and midlevel elevations. Topographic and vegetative screening in the southern section is poor. Most of the vegetation is low growing sagebrush and rabbitbrush, except for an isolated patch of pinyon-juniper. The shallow canyons and low hills become a broad outwash plain along the southern boundary.

With the exception of the extreme northern end which is narrow, the Augusta Mountain WSA is of a size and shape that would provide solitude. The military flights are a major source of outside sights and sounds.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: This WSA does offer some sightseeing opportunities for geological features, wild horses and scenery. Backpacking, hiking and primitive camping can be done throughout the study area; however, there are no significant features that would attract use or provide an outstanding experience. Several of the canyons are reported to have abundant fossils.

D. Special Features: The plant Phacelia glaberrima (smooth phacelia), is listed as "sensitive" on the Nevada Native Plant Society list and can be found in the southern sector of the WSA.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The WSA is considered to be manageable but there will be major problems due to the following: 2,000 acres of valid, preFLPMA mining claims, 18,101 acres of land under geothermal leases and 44,266 acres under oil and gas leases. If any of these parcels of land are developed, as the possessors would have the legal right to do, intrusions created by mining, drilling or many other operations would seriously impact the wilderness values present. Reasonable access to allow the possessors of these claims and leases to reach the parcels would also have to be granted. Other management concerns include 4.4 miles of ways, and regular military flights over the study area.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The following conclusions were reached: 37,400 acres rated moderate for metallic mineral potential (tungsten, zinc, nickel, mercury, cobalt and uranium), 89,372 acres rated as moderate for nonmetallic mineral potential (limestone, dolomite and zeolite), 31,000 acres with moderate potential for oil and gas, 31,000 acres with high potential for geothermal and 21,300 acres with moderate potential for geothermal resources. The Dixie Valley Known Geothermal Resource Area (KGRA) includes five sections within the WSA. Documented oil showings occur in chambers of ammonite fossils found in Triassic shales in the Augusta Mountain WSA.

There are 2,000 acres of valid, preFLPMA mining claims present, as well as 18,101 acres of geothermal leases and 44,266 acres of oil and gas leases. There is no present production of any mineral, geothermal or oil and gas resources in the study area.

In summary, quantities of various mineral and energy resources are unknown, but there is a moderate potential for mineral occurrence throughout the WSA. There is also high potential for geothermal resources in one third of the study area and a moderate potential in part of the remainder. The total acres of projected disturbance from energy/mineral activity would be approximately 195 acres.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC COMMENTS

During the initial and intensive inventory stages (1978-1980), many of the 12 comments discussed characteristics of the area (intrusions, resources, wilderness qualities) or suggested boundary changes. Reasons given for supporting wilderness study area status were the following: special features and the area met wilderness specifications. Reasons given for opposing wilderness study area status were these: other resource values, roads, intrusions, lack of outstanding opportunities for solitude and that it was in a military operating area. These comments addressed the entire 96,000 acres of the original study area. About 7,000 acres have since been released from wilderness consideration.

Three formal public meetings were held in Nevada (Gerlach on November 1, Winnemucca on November 3 and Reno on November 8, 1983) during the 90-day comment period for the Draft Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement. The one oral comment that was received supported the Proposed Action (No wilderness). Of the 68 written comments received, 58 of them supported more wilderness and 10 of them agreed with the Proposed Action. Comments addressed the need to preserve the land in its natural state for future generations, characteristics of the WSA (prehistoric fossils, scenery, wildlife, wild and natural aspects, examples of vulcanism, opportunity for solitude experiences) as well as roads and other intrusions, military flights and the potential mineral resources.

Pershing County (with about 35 percent of the WSA) wants to preserve all public lands within the county's boundaries as multiple-use areas (multiple use is not defined). No comments about wilderness were received from county agencies or officials of Lander or Churchill Counties. The Governor of the State of Nevada concurred with the Bureau's recommendation. The U.S. Navy supports wilderness designation provided no restrictions are placed on military flights.

No comments were received on the Final Environmental Impact Statement.